

Orange County Life



JOHN HALL

One man recalls the attack one Dec. 7

WHATTA DAY ... Who doesn't remember? Herman Jones is an usher at Anaheim Convention Center. He was a security officer for 22 years at Hughes Aircraft in Fullerton. He also was in the Navy 21 years. He's 72 now and doesn't really need to work. Just does it to keep active. A widower since 1982, he was married 38 good years, has two daughters. Nice life, but he'd be the first to tell you it's been rather ordinary.

Except that it's extraordinary that he even had a life. It took some extraordinary luck, and Herman would be the first to tell you that, too.

It was 48 years ago this morning — a Sunday that particular Dec. 7 in 1941, sun shining bright and clear, almost 8 a.m. — that Herman first heard distant explosions in the direction of the air base at Hawaii's Hickam Field.

"I was just a skinny 24-year-old gunner's mate," he said, once again calling up the old memory. "I was in our tiny gun shop, barefoot, getting ready to scrub the deck for admiral's inspection. It was a beautiful morning.

"The explosions didn't register at first. But in another instant I realized something was terribly wrong. A plane came out of the sun on the seaward side and I saw the red ball under its wings."

Next thing he knew everything was blowing up. Herman was on the USS Oklahoma — luckily on a deck above the water line. The torpedoes struck with a shattering jolt. Oil tanks deep below ruptured, and the gusher shot into the sky, covering everything in sight.

"We couldn't even recognize each other as we ran to our positions," Herman said.

"It didn't really matter. The ship was going down. In less than five minutes, we got the command to abandon ship."

Herman slid down the side of the Oklahoma that was still above water and swam to the nearby USS Maryland to join other survivors regrouping and manning the guns and firing back. There were a lucky 900 above water on the Oklahoma when it was hit, and they escaped with their lives. But a gruesome total of 448 men below deck were trapped and perished in an instant.

It wasn't quite the complete horror of the USS Arizona, but it obviously was horrible enough. Earlier this year, survivors of the battleship Oklahoma held a reunion in the state of Oklahoma at the invitation of Gov. Henry Bellmon.

They rededicated the battleship and held memorial services in Oklahoma City for those lost. ROTC units from Oklahoma State University read the names of the 448 who didn't make it as bells sounded from churches and public buildings throughout the entire state.

"I just hope those who didn't survive heard us crying for them as their names were called," Herman said.

We all cry and say thanks again to all those who gave us everything and to all those like the remarkable, extraordinary gunner's mate, Herman Jones, who lived to fight again and make it easier on all the rest of us all our lives.

It was a day that has lived in infamy, just as President Roosevelt predicted, a day that led to more changes and had more effect on this world than any other day this century.

But time passes and memories fade. We all should remember Pearl Harbor as vividly as Herman Jones. Say, Mr. usher, let me show you to your seat this time.

John Hall is a Register columnist. His column appears Sundays through Fridays.

Who says nobody's perfect?

When Chief Gunner's Mate Herman Jones retired from the U.S. Navy in 1959, he had a good, not to mention exciting, record to look back upon.

In the 21 years Herman served in the Navy, he did not miss one day of duty for reasons of sickness or personal absence. Perfect attendance.

Not even having been aboard three different ships when they were sunk during World War II marred that accomplishment.

So, one asks, how can such a record be topped?

Ask Herman now.

When he retires today after 22 years as a Plant Protection officer at Ground Systems Group's Fullerton facility, he can point again with pride to an absolutely perfect attendance record.

"Never absent, late for work, sick, or on a leave of absence," affirmed Russ Francisco, chief of GSG Plant Protection.

"What's more, Officer Jones has been a brute for punishment by volunteering to work all the overtime and holidays that were ever offered to him," the chief added.

Herman, though, tempers his record with a generous dose of modesty.

"First of all," he said of his Navy days, "this wasn't hero stuff; just a day-to-day and often mundane occupation."

"As for my years with Hughes, I really have a feeling of gratitude for the company having given me the opportunity to work."

Herman joined GSG within a week of leaving the Navy.

"It was a dream come true," he said of his new job in Fullerton. "I was able to obtain employment a mere four miles from my home in Anaheim."

As the years went by, Herman's health "remained good," and he continued to report to work, "not ever doubting that surely some emergency or other thing might break the spell. It is still inconceivable to me that nothing did happen over such a long span of time."

Herman went after his job aggressively. For example, he

was among the first to join the company's new First Aid Volunteer Program in the early 1960s. In time, he became a qualified instructor in first aid and eventually earned an Emergency Medical Technician certificate, in addition to an ambulance driver's certificate. In the meantime, he watched the company grow around him.



Herman Jones
... perfect 43-year record

"We only had Bldgs. 600 and 601 here when I started," he recalls. "All the other facilities in use by the Group were leased and scattered over a wide area."

"I remember that we would be dispatched to various post assignments with everyone crammed into a single vehicle. In those days, we had no radios or pagers for communication; the telephone was our lifeline."

As GSG evolved into its present-day complex, so did the site's security operation.

"Now our communications center is comparable to that of a large police department," he said. "Our training and standards for Plant Protection officers have been through several changes and improved with the times. We're a 24-hour nerve center for this Group, with our finger on its pulse every minute."

"For example," Herman cited, "when our people or property are threatened, we move fast. I've seen our training and experience work to save buildings from fire and flood, and to keep minor mishaps or misunderstandings

between people from developing into dangerous situations."

But "dangerous situations" are old hat for Herman.

He was aboard the battleship USS Oklahoma when Japanese aircraft sank her at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

Herman escaped the sinking ship by boarding the USS Maryland, which was moored alongside.

"I just happened to have looked back toward the USS Arizona when it blew up," he said.

In June 1942, Herman was aboard the USS Porter when the destroyer was sunk by torpedoes during the Battle of Midway.

And, Herman was serving aboard the destroyer USS Abner Read when the vessel was bombed and sunk by a Japanese aircraft in the Sarigao Straits in November 1944. The Abner Read had just completed escort duty for Douglas MacArthur on the general's return to the Philippines and was coming to the aid of a stricken ship when hit.

"I felt grateful just to be alive when we celebrated victory at long last," he said.

From gratitude for having survived one career comes satisfaction for having completed another.

"I will always feel a sense of pride when I drive by the Fullerton plant in my retirement," said Herman, "knowing that I was once a part of it."

Herman, with his wife, Helen, plans to begin his third career—retirement—with a Hawaiian vacation.



Herman ... in WW II